

## **The relational construction of the individual and society and the necessity for a relational concept of education (Bildung)**

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**Abstract:** Since the 1980s, we have seen an increase and expansion of individualization processes. Initially, the liberation of the individual from the boundaries of normative constraints was celebrated under the catchphrase postmodernism (Lyotard, 1984; Welsch, 1988). Over time, however, it would become apparent that not everyone benefitted from this development (Neckel, 2000) and that the reduction in normative constraints came at a price, namely the loss of normative orientation. When we look at societal developments of the last decade, we can see a fundamental erosion of the social in many Western cultures. The answer to this should by no means be a return to overcome constraints. But there is a necessity for an education that enables the individual to act responsibly in a (allegedly) multi-optimal world. An education that acknowledges that the relationship between the individual and society is inevitably reciprocal. As a basis for this, a concept of education will be outlined below that is based on the epistemological and social-theoretical foundations of Relational Constructivism (Kraus, 2015; 2019a; b). Central to this is the theoretical concept of the individual and society as relational constructions that both enable and restrict each other.

**Keywords:** Relational Constructivism; Education; Enlightenment; Individual and Society; Epistemologies; Relational Social Work

### **1 Relational Constructivism – epistemological and social-theoretical starting points**

A relational-constructivist-based theory of Relational Social Work<sup>1</sup> (Kraus, 2019) is committed to the enlightenment of the subject and the liberation of the individual<sup>2</sup> as well as the shaping and development of society based on criteria of social justice.

In this respect, the “individual perspective” of the Enlightenment must be understood as a relational concept. Furthermore, the relational-constructivist definitions of the individual and the society are pivotal to the theory of Relational Social Work. Especially this shows in the

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<sup>1</sup> A fundamental distinction must be made between the use of the term "Relational Social Work" as a network and relationship-oriented practice paradigm on the one hand (e.g. Früchtel et al., 2016; Folghraiter, 2017) and as a theoretical concept that proposes a relational definition of the subject, function and professionalism of social work on the basis of Relational Constructivism on the other hand (Kraus, 2023a).

<sup>2</sup> This paper cannot provide a comprehensive relational-constructivist definition of the term "individual". It should be noted, however, that I use the term "individual" primarily for a person that can be distinguished from others, and the term "subject" for a perceiving and acting person (Keupp, 2005, p. 804f.). Therefore, the term individual is used to refer to the relationship of a person with their environment (specifically with society), and the term subject to refer to a person's cognitive and acting abilities. When I understand an individual as distinct from other entities and a subject as a perceiving and acting entity, I do not use the word “entity” in ontological, but in terms of formal logic. Withal, an individual is always understood as a perceiving and acting subject, and a subject as an individual that can be distinguished from any other individual.

influence these definitions host for the understanding of education, the individual, and societal development within this theory of social work.

In this article I will outline the key points of Relational Constructivism (Kraus, 2023b) to explain the construction of the individual and society on the one hand and the relational paradigm<sup>3</sup> on the other. The term constructivism (Kraus, 2018a; b) stands for approaches that emphasize human knowledge as a construct, which also applies to Relational Constructivism. In contrast to other constructivist approaches, Relational Constructivism combines the subject-centred perspective of Radical Constructivism (Glaserfeld, 1995) and the social systems-centred perspective of Operative Constructivism (Luhmann, 1995) under its relational paradigm. This should create a paradigm-forming horizon for a relational notion of what it means to be a human. Even if Relational Constructivism focuses on relations, the significance of the subject as constructor and of the environment to both enable and limit the conditions for construction cannot be overestimated. The focus of Relational Constructivism is therefore on subjects, environments, and their relations (Kraus, 2014; 2015; 2019a; b; 2023b).

The expansion of Immanuel Kant's "enthronement" of the individual<sup>4</sup> to include a social perspective can already be found in Paul Natorp's<sup>5</sup> reflections on the social question.<sup>6</sup>

Paul Natorp<sup>7</sup> emphasized the necessary relationality of educational science by pointing out that the education of the individual is socially conditioned, just as, on the other hand, the

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<sup>3</sup> The genesis of Relational Constructivism can be classified as part of a "relational turn" that is emerging in various disciplines in recent years. (Kraus, 2023b).

Even though the concept of relations in European intellectual history can be traced back to Aristotle (Schäffter, 2014, p. 5ff.; von Wolzogen, 1992; Kraus, 2021c), its increasing establishment in the humanities and social sciences can be observed, especially since the 2010s. So far, no unified relational-theoretical discourse is present; rather, the term relation is used in different contexts at least as differently as its theoretical provenances and contexts of use differ (Kraus, 2021b; c). The term is used at different levels of abstraction and the term, and its use are by no means always theoretically justified and precisely defined. Relational perspectives are relevant, for example, in epistemological approaches (Kraus, 2023b), in system theory (Luhmann, 1984, p. 41) and constructivist considerations on the concept of system (Maturana, 1982, p. 141–142; Kraus, 2024), in social work sciences (Anhorn et al., 2008, p. 37 ff.; Bitzan & Bolay, 2013, S. 48; Böhnisch & Funk, 2013, p. 149 ff.; Dewe & Otto, 2012; 2015; Diebäcker, 2014, p. 5; Folgheraiter, 2017; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012, p. 473ff.; Früchtel et al., 2016, p. 8; Hosemann & Geiling, 2013, p. 26; Kessl, 2013; Kessl & Reutlinger, 2010, p. 21; Königter, 2013, p. 192; Kraus, 2019 b, p. 24; 2023a; Löwenstein, 2016; 2021c; Noack, 2024; Röh, 2013, p. 227; Ziegler, 2011, p. 130) in educational science (Herzog, 2001; Kraus, 2021c; Echenbach & Schäffter 2021; Todd, 2022), sociology of space (Löw, 2016) or in a relational sociology (Emirbayer, 1997; Donati, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Nor should we ignore Kant's recognition of social and societal perspectives – for example, when he argues that the promotion of enlightenment is an indispensable social project (Kant, 2003 [1803], p. 8-11).

<sup>5</sup> The fundamental point here is the statement that "man [...] becomes human only through human community" (Natorp, 1925a, p. 84) and that "an I [...] does not exist without a counter-I, without a you" (Natorp, 1925b, p. 81). For Paul Natorp's relevance for relational theoretical discourses, see von Wolzogen (1984; 2000); for social-pedagogical discourses, see Niemeyer (1989; 2010). Considering the significance of the social question when Natorp discussed it in 1894, the poor reception "the most forgotten of all social pedagogues" (Niemeyer, 2010, p. 89) has received to this very day is downright astonishing – especially as his works and ideas have been recommended time and again (von Wolzogen, 1984; 2000; Niemeyer, 1989; 2010; Henseler, 2012; Löwenstein, 2020); quotations translated by author. Whether Nohl's assessment Natorp's social pedagogy had become historical and a renewed appraisal therefore simply unnecessary (Nohl, 1926, p. 227) was justified at the time is open to debate. For the present, I, however, dare to dispute this.

<sup>6</sup> For a distinction between Natorp's position and Kant's in this regard, see also Niemeyer, 1989, p. 251.

shaping of social life by humans is fundamentally conditioned by an education of the individual who is to participate in it (Natorp, 1899, p. 80).

The Neo-Kantian Paul Natorp<sup>8</sup> should not be appropriated in the name of Constructivism.<sup>9</sup> It should be noted, however, that Natorp developed a series of arguments, some of them fundamental, some far-reaching (von Wolzogen, 2000), stressing that

“individual consciousness as such is essentially unique, separate from any other; it can never reach over into another or become one with it in any way” (Natorp, 1925a, p. 85).<sup>10</sup>

This position is compatible with the relational-constructivist assumption of cognitive self-referentiality and the resulting informational closure of human cognition.<sup>11</sup>

Like Relational Constructivism, however, Natorp warns against restricting our view exclusively to the uniqueness and separateness of individual consciousness, as this would “lead not only to ethical egoism, but inevitably to theoretical solipsism” (Natorp, 1925a, p. 85).<sup>12</sup> This leads to an emphasis on the reciprocal relationality of the formation conditions of the individual and society.

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<sup>7</sup> In his outline of a theory of social pedagogy which for Natorp is not a separable part of educational theory, but first and foremost the primary aim of pedagogy in general (Natorp, 1925a, p. 94).

<sup>8</sup> ... who in the context of his social pedagogy consequently does not classify himself as a Neo-Kantian, but as a ‘Pestalozzian’ (Natorp, 1905b; Niemeyer, 1989, p. 243).

<sup>9</sup> A (in)compatibility with constructivist discourses can be found in Natorp’s reflections on the basic categories of “relation” (Natorp, 1925b, pp. 49-68) and “individuation” (Natorp, 1925b, pp. 69-92), for example, in which he also establishes connections as well as demarcations, especially to Kant and Leibniz.

<sup>10</sup> Quotation translated by author. Original quote: „Dem Individualbewusstsein als solchem ist Einzigkeit, Sonderung von jedem anderen wesentlich; es kann niemals in ein anderes gleichsam hinüberreichen oder auf irgendeine Weise mit ihm eins werden.“ (Natorp, 1925a, p. 85).

<sup>11</sup> Starting from this perspective, my development of Relational Constructivism began in the late 1990s. Even though it has its roots in Radical Constructivism (Glaserfeld, 1995), the extension of the epistemological focus on “the subject” in terms of social theory (Kraus, 2000; 2002) is characteristic from its outset. It is constitutive for my approach that the focus has thus shifted to the structural coupling of human being and their environments and thus to the relational conditions of knowledge construction (Kraus, 2013; 2014; 2015; 2019a; b; 2021a; 2023b). These considerations rest on a fundamental consideration: While the actual **existence** of a physical reality is by no means questioned, a **corresponding cognitive representation** to this very reality is doubted (Kraus, 2013, pp. 52-64). This skepticism is based on the insight that any access to reality is bound to our ability to perceive. Consequently, the **results** of perceptual processes are regarded as cognitive constructions that cannot be compared to the specific **event of perception**. Cognition therefore has no direct access to reality, but only to its own cognitive states. Accordingly, cognitive functioning is described as fundamentally self-referential (Cognitive self-referentiality – on the correspondences with neurobiological discourses, Kraus (2013, pp. 28-50).

<sup>12</sup> Quotation translated by author. Original quote: „nicht nur zum ethischen Egoismus, sondern notwendig zum theoretischen Solipsismus kommen“ (Natorp a.a.O.) Even if Relational Constructivism too rejects an approach that solely focuses on the perspective of the subject, one cannot help but ask to what extent Natorp’s arguments are compatible in this respect. For not only does he refer to the relational conditions of individual consciousness (see Natorp, 1925a, p. 84; 1925b, p. 81), but also does he postulate a regularity of cognitive development that is independent of an observer’s point of view (see Natorp, 1925a, p. 85f.) Constructivism, on the other hand, considers the relevance of the observer’s perspective to be fundamental, and even if the idea that reason is universal as postulated by the Enlightenment (Kant, 1987/1790; 1991/1784; 2003/1803) is connectable insofar as it refers to universal rules of reason (as is the case with logic), one has to ask to what extent Natorp understands not only the cognitive rules of the emergence of morality as universal, but also the individual foundations of

## 2 Relational Social Work and a relational understanding of education

To help understand the concept of education as proposed in this paper, a field of application shall be outlined below: The relational-constructivist-based theory of Relational Social Work (Kraus, 2023a) in which this concept of education is a corner stone.

Fundamental for this theory is the following definition of social work:

Social work contributes to the shaping of the social sphere,

- whose aims are based in the criteria of social justice,
- which is scientifically substantiated and reflected in its decisions and actions,
- which acknowledges the interests of individuals and society and
- is focused on the interface between the individual and society (Kraus, 2023a).

This emphasizes a functional orientation of social work founded in the notion of the relationality of the human being<sup>13</sup>. Essential for the definition of social work as both a profession and an academic / a scientific discipline is therefore its 1. function for the individual and society, 2. normative and 3. professional foundations, 4. specific focus and 5. area/s of responsibility (jurisdiction resp.). Specifically, professional social work is characterized by both a normative orientation and a specialist scientific foundation (that distinguishes it from voluntary work, for example), and its responsibility primarily lies at the interface between the individual and society (other than professions that tend to focus either on social systems or on individuals).

The relational understanding of education is therefore part of the expertise of social work, which is primarily focused on the interaction of humans with their environments and on the relationality of human existence in general respectively.

## 3 The individual and society as relational constructs

Using the terminology of Relational Constructivism:

Based on the “*double bond of human structural development*” (Kraus, 2013, p. 105; 2019a, p. 95; 2019b, p. 33)<sup>14</sup>, the development of the individual<sup>15</sup> is neither determined by the environment (and therefore neither by society), nor can it happen independently of it.

(Self-)formation is subject to individual structural rules on the one hand and relational environmental conditions on the other.

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moral sentiments (see on the perspective of Relational Constructivism Kraus (2019b, esp. pp. 170-212), on the perspective of Marburg Neo-Kantianism see Natorp (1914; 1925b).

<sup>13</sup> It be emphasised that the notion of “being” refers to relational and not ontological thought immanent in the theory of relational constructivism.

<sup>14</sup> Quotation translated by author. Original quote: „Doppelbindung menschlicher Strukturentwicklung“ (Kraus, 2013, p. 105; 2019a, p. 95; 2019b, p. 33).

<sup>15</sup> The notion ‘individual’ denotes the class of individuals; it is a general concept which governs the set of all actual and possible individuals. This implies a differentiation between the concept of the individual and the set of (actual or possible) individuals.

This has consequences for both the **individual and society**:

**Regarding the individual this means:** Even if the individual's development is not determined by society, it is nevertheless subject to historical and cultural conditions.<sup>16</sup>

The individual is both enabled and limited in its development by (a) its unique cognitive structures and (b) the social conditions it finds itself in.

**Regarding society this means:** The societal development does not happen independently of forgoing social structures nor from the individual itself. This means that both social structures and the individuals that form a society enable and limit the conditions for societal developments.

A fundamental aspect of Relational Constructivism is that society and the individual cannot be explained independently of each other and that neither a primacy of the individual nor a primacy of society is justifiable. Relational Constructivism expands Natorp's perspective on the impact social conditions have on the development of an individual by taking a more comprehensive perspective on relational conditions (of which social conditions are only one, albeit important, part).

Accordingly, the fundamental principle of Relational Constructivism is to direct attention towards the relationships between the individual and its environment. This is achieved by acknowledging the individual as both a constructing and an acting subject of cognition and action, whilst simultaneously recognizing the social and material environments in which they exist as conditions that both enable and limit construction and action.

In other words, Relational Constructivism puts equal emphasis on the individual, its environment, and their relations.

## 4 Excursus: Lifeworlds, life conditions, biopsychic and social systems

### 4.1 Differentiation and relation between lifeworld and life conditions

The relational-constructivist concept of *lifeworld* (Lebenswelt) and *life conditions* (Lebenslage) (Kraus, 2015) can shed light on some basic assumptions of Relational Constructivism. In the late 1990s, its starting point was initially the critical debate of the phenomenological roots of the term lifeworld (Husserl, 1962; Schütz & Luckmann, 2003), which were later supplemented by Habermas's societal-critical reflections on the colonization of lifeworlds (Habermas, 1981; 1984; 1987).

With reference to the fundamentally social-scientific principles of the term life conditions (Neurath, 1931; Weisser, 1956, p. 986), the concepts of *lifeworld* and *life conditions* were ultimately established as relational constructivist terms and became essential building blocks of Relational Constructivism (Kraus, 2004; 2015; 2019a, p. 96). Both the differentiation and the relation between the two categories of *lifeworld* and *life conditions* are crucial for this theoretical perspective.

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<sup>16</sup> See Elias's reflections on the reciprocal relationality of human self-awareness and its social-symbolic universe (Elias, 1992, p. 40) as well as on the interdependence and relative autonomy of the individual and society (Elias, 2006, p. 99f).

**Life conditions** (Lebenslage) means a person's<sup>17</sup> material and immaterial circumstances of life.

**Lifeworld** (Lebenswelt) means a person's subjective construction of reality, which it forms under the enabling and limiting circumstances of its life conditions. (Kraus, 2019a, p. 96).<sup>18</sup>

In this respect, the concept lifeworld stands for a person's subjective perspective, whereas the concept life conditions refers to the framework conditions on which its perspective is based.

Life conditions not only refer to individual life spaces, income, environments, and social networks, but also to a person's organism (physical constitution). And it is in dealing with the perception of these conditions that a person then constructs its lifeworld.

The distinction between lifeworld and life conditions allows us to reflect on their relationality and to consider life conditions as limiting and enabling framework conditions for the construction of individual lifeworlds.

“These deliberations on a constructivist understanding of lifeworlds now shape the integration of micro-, meso- and macroscopic approaches called for by Invernizzi and Butterwege: This integration is not only necessary in order to interrelate the subjective perspectives and the objective framework conditions with one another, but because the objective framework conditions only acquire their relevance to the subjective lifeworlds in their subjective perception and evaluation.” (Ferdinand, 2014, p. 31)<sup>19</sup>

## 4.2 Biopsychological and social systems

In Relational Constructivism the **individual** is regarded as a **biopsychological system**, while **society is seen as a social system** consisting of individuals.

This view is based on the following definition of a system:

“From an observer's perspective, the term **system** is defined as coherent entities whose internal relations are quantitatively and/or qualitatively differentiated from its relations to other entities. These differences, determined from an observer's perspective, allow

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<sup>17</sup> The term person stands for the epistemological subject as well as for the acting and deciding individual in its societal embedding.

<sup>18</sup> Translated by author. Original:

„Als Lebenslage gelten die materiellen und immateriellen Lebensbedingungen eines Menschen.

Als Lebenswelt gilt das subjektive Wirklichkeitskonstrukt eines Menschen, welches dieser unter den Bedingungen seiner Lebenslage bildet“ (Kraus, 2019b, p. 37; 2023b, n. p.)

<sup>19</sup> Quotation translated by author. Original quote: „Diese Ausführungen zu einem konstruktivistischen Verständnis von Lebenswelten profilieren nun die von Invernizzi und Butterwege geforderte Integration mikro-, meso- und makroskopischer Ansätze: Diese Integration ist nicht nur notwendig, um die subjektiven Perspektiven und die objektiven Rahmenbedingungen miteinander in Beziehung zu setzen, sondern weil die objektiven Rahmenbedingungen erst in ihrer subjektiven Wahrnehmung und Bewertung ihre Relevanz zu den subjektiven Lebenswelten erhalten“ (Ferdinand, 2014, p. 31).

the observer to create a system boundary and thus to distinguish a system from its environment." (Kraus, 2019b, p. 37, 2023b, n. p.)<sup>20</sup>

The relevance of the observer's perspective, which is crucial to Relational Constructivism, becomes clear here.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, statements about systems cannot be made independently of the observer. Systems cannot be perceived objectively but can only be determined as a system from an observer's perspective with previously defined criteria and thereby differentiated from their environment.

## 5 Against the primacy of the individual or society

This perspective of Relational Constructivism on epistemology and social theory can also be deployed to counteract a one-sidedness in social-pedagogical discourse that has historically led to either an overemphasis on the individual or the community. Since the 1880s, social-pedagogical discourse has repeatedly and controversially debated whether the focus should be either on educating the individual (i. e. as an individual being) or on social development and the "social question" (see Reyer, 2001; 2002; Henseler, 2012).<sup>22</sup> Natorp argued against a one-sided consideration of the individual as early as the late 19th century by introducing the notion of the "social question" (Natorp, 1894). Even though much may have changed in the meantime, I would strongly argue that we investigate it again after all this time. For even if I argue in favor of the enlightenment, emancipation and development of the distinguishable individual and the perceiving and acting subject on the epistemological and social-theoretical basis of Relational Constructivism, this does by no means lead to the primacy of the individual.

Firstly, because the individual can only be thought of in a relational way, and secondly, because of the "risks and side effects" associated with the primacy of the individual and the demand for their free development. In view of the considerable changes since the 1980s, we could ask today whether the "liberation" of the individual from social constraints and rigid normative guidelines (see Beck, 1986, p. 206) in the postmodern or second modern era has come at the price of the individual's "liberation" from all social responsibility.

Relationally, (self-)education cannot only be understood as a project of individual self-realization, in which the social conditions seem to be merely a resource for such a self-realization. However, the overemphasis on the individual should not be replaced by an overemphasis on the community.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Quotation translated by author. Original quote: „Als System gelten aus einer Beobachterperspektive als zusammenhängend bestimmte Gebilde, deren interne Relationen quantitativ und/oder qualitativ von ihren Relationen zu anderen Entitäten unterschieden werden. Diese aus einer Beobachterperspektive bestimmten Unterschiede ermöglichen die Konstituierung einer Systemgrenze, durch die das System von seiner Umwelt unterschieden wird“ (Kraus, 2019b, p. 37, 2023b, n. p.).

<sup>21</sup> Be it noted that the observer perspective describes a general phenomenon which is not restricted to some specific observer. Rather, it means that every statement is made by some observer. Technically there are as many observer perspectives as human beings.

<sup>22</sup> For a general reflection on the different understandings and emphases of the individual and society since antiquity, see Elias 1987.

<sup>23</sup> In this context, for instance, the "equality of community-based social pedagogy and national interests" (Henseler, 2012, p. 4) has been criticized.

Both perspectives would be equally narrowed down resulting in a limited view: On the one hand it is essential to stress the relevance of relational conditions and to consider the social together to fend off the primacy of the person. On the other hand, we must focus on the perceiving and acting subject and the emancipation and development of the individual in order to ward off the primacy of the social.

## 6 Relational Constructivism's notion of education

If we want to counteract excessive individualization processes, we need theoretical tools that allow us to reflect on both the interaction of the individual with its environments and the relationality of human existence in general. In addition to individual and social system theories, this approach would be primarily based on relational theories. Relational Constructivism can contribute to this, insofar as its theoretical models and conceptual tools aim to reflect on the relationality of lifeworlds and life conditions and thus on individual and social conditions. In general, this involves questions of cognition, decision-making and action, understanding and comprehension, learning and teaching, and specifically questions of individual and social lifestyles and the possibilities of a successful life under relational conditions (Kraus, 2014; 2015; 2019a; b; 2023a; b).

The enlightenment and development of both the individual and society is still one of the great challenges of our time, in which a change of perspective, from "I" to "we", from the individual to the community, seems essential. A change where a relational notion of education is a keystone that neither leaves the individual nor society behind or prefers one to the other as the measure of all things.

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